

# A gentleman journalist who filled 90 years

## *EDITORIAL BOARD*

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Bo Byers was blessed with a long life 90 years. There really was no other choice because Byers had a lot to do. And when friends and family gather at his Austin funeral today, they will recall that he got it done.

And, just as important, they will recall how he got it done. More than anything, Byers will be remembered as a gentleman journalist. Think that's an oxymoron? You never met Byers.

The one-word headline on Byers' life is the same as the single descriptive word on his headstone at the Texas State Cemetery: Journalist. But like many headlines, it offers just a hint of the full story.

Byers came to Austin from Missouri at age 6 to live with an aunt and uncle after his dad died of pneumonia. Byers was 12 when he had his first byline in his hometown daily. By the time he retired from journalism in 1983, he had chronicled a generation of politicians (including riding in the Dallas motorcade in which President John F. Kennedy was killed) and, through his undying commitment to readers, changed the culture of newspapering at the Texas Capitol.

He spent 10 years with The Associated Press prior to a 27-year career with the Houston Chronicle's Austin bureau. As bureau chief, Byers was a powerful force in the Capitol press corps, using his low-key manner and tenacious reporting to keep readers informed while serving as a role model for statehouse reporters.

"Bo lived by a strict code of professional ethics long before the rest of us could spell the word," Glen Castlebury, an American-Statesman Capitol reporter in the 1960s, recently recalled.

Byers was ahead of the curve in deciding that reporters should not compromise their relations with those they covered. Back in the day, more than one industry — movie theaters, the beer business and others — used the power of freebies to curry favor with Capitol reporters. Likewise, statewide officeholders would pass out turkeys and hams at holiday time.

"Bo and his Chronicle staff quietly had forever said no thanks to all the freebies," Castlebury recalled. "No public announcement, no show of righteousness. Just quietly, privately, Bo did not accept."

It was the same way Byers went about his business, be it coverage of scandal at the Texas Veterans Land Board or the daily task of trying to figure out what was going on at the Capitol.

For Byers, retirement was a mere milepost between what he did before it and what he did after it. At age 73, he returned to the University of Texas to earn a master's degree in journalism. In his 80s, he took singing lessons and earned a spot in the choir at Austin's Central Presbyterian Church, where he became a member in 1926.

Starting to feel like you've been wasting your time? Hang on, there's more. During World War II, Byers, then a recent UT graduate, enlisted in the Army Air Corps and served as a B-17 navigator on 30 European missions. His nation honored his service by awarding him the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with three Oak Leaf Clusters. Byers served 27 years in the Texas National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve, retiring as a major.

In his spare (?) time, Byers was a competitive tennis player who, characteristically, turned his pastime into community service. In 1978, he served as first president of the Capital Area Tennis Association.

And, perhaps above all else, Byers was married to Mary Catherine Cowan, who died in 2006, for 64 years in a union that produced six children.

"As a boy," Byers wrote in this newspaper in March 2009, "I thought about becoming a preacher, a teacher or a reporter."

Journalism prevailed, fueled by his early forays into it at Austin High School. Last year, Byers wrote about how, as a schoolboy reporter, he had gotten an interview with then-famous actor Walter Huston, who was in town for a play at the Paramount Theater.

At the theater, he was told Huston had no time for the interview.

"So I went around the alley entrance. When someone opened the door, I jumped inside, walked across the stage and told Huston I wanted to interview him for the Austin High School newspaper. He was very courteous and agreed," Byers wrote.

Sometimes in this business you have to use the alley entrance. But Bo Byers showed us that doesn't mean you can't be a gentleman when you do.